A Fascinating Detective Story—by Horace Hutchinson

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Crisp had been putting these questions to him in a very quiet, gentle voice, moving no unnecessary muscle and not taking his unblinking eyes off the wooden Scotch face, but at his next question caught a new quality, keener and more incisive, in his tone: "I suppose you were dressed because you had been out—late—after dinner?"

The butler's voice took on a new note at that, too. It seemed as if the question startled him out of his indifference.

"I was no," he declared with an entirely different emphasis from that with which he had said the self-same words just before.

"You did not go out at all that night, after dinner?"

"I did not."

"And if you were ready dressed when you heard the bell, of course, you were in the hall first—before any of the others who had to put on some clothes before they came down?"

"Aye, I was in the hall first."

"And I suppose you spoke to Mr. Livesay first?"

"Then ye suppose wrong," said Grainger, dourly.

"Did you not open the door then?"

"There's two bolts and a bit chain and a big lock and key before you can open the door."

"Which would take" (Crisp pulled out his watch as he spoke and looked at the second-hand while he went through the motions of pulling back one bolt at the top of a door, another bolt at the bottom, unhitching the chain and turning the key) "exactly five seconds."

Grainger offered no comment on this estimate.

"So that it is not very apparent what you were doing—why you were not the first to get the door opened and to speak to Mr. Livesay."

Grainger offered no solution of the puzzle.

"Now," said Crisp, and his eyes seemed to me all of a sudden to take on an expression twice as penetrating as before, "is it that you cannot or is it that you will not tell us—Miss Carlton and me—what you were doing or why it was that you were not the first to get speech with Mr. Livesay?"

The wooden visage did seem to be just a little bit perturbed at that. For the first time in the interview he answered with an air of slight confusion:

"I canna say. I micht has been dozing. I canna say."

The gong rang then and I went in to luncheon. Uncle Ralph had his own way into the dining room from the library, so that he did not pass through the hall. I told him of Sergeant Crisp's being in the hall and wishing to speak to him. He did not seem at all surprised and said he would see him in the library after luncheon. It appeared that Grainger had told him of the detective's arrival, so that he was quite prepared for his visit.

That luncheon remains in my memory as a peculiarly painful ordeal. Neither uncle nor myself had yet learned how to bear and wear our trouble. Out of the desperate gloom and dazedness of the night be had roused himself to an attempt at naturalness, and even of gaiety, ignoring all that had happened, which was quite dreadful.

Grainger came in and took his place in waiting on us very soon, with his usual badly carved wooden expression. I heard afterward that Sergeant Crisp had been able to extract very little more from him, and, indeed, realizing the futility of it, had put very few more questions to him. Grainger had been so far amenable, however, as to ask Susan, the upper housemaid, to come to the drawing-room to be interviewed.

The sergeant had questioned me closely about the persons that composed our household staff. Its head, below stairs, should, traditionally, I suppose, have been the cook, and so, for official purposes, she always was considered, but our cook of the moment was rather a young woman, and the person of real authority was old Susan, who had been in service at Scotney House ever since she was a girl, and was now regarded in the light of a family friend rather than servant. Whatever was required, appeal was always made to Susan, and she never was found wanting.

Just what it was that Sergeant Crisp hoped to find out by interrogating Susan I do not think that even he knew himself. He was merely, as I imagine, acting on his general principle of neglecting no possibility of information. He had something of the large optimism of Mr. Micawber, ever anticipating that something would turn up.

In spite of all his experience and in spite of all his astuteness I knew, for the little man himself told me as much, that he was at this time just as beclouded as I was in the midst of all the mysteries—of the many and various mysteries—that enveloped this tragic and violent death of my young aunt. There was, of course, the main and central problem—by whom had she been killed and why?—but there were also a number of minor problems lying circumferentially to this as their centre.

Why had she gone out, as she had done, to meet her fate? Why had she affected, if, indeed, it was only affection, illness, and why had she gone up to her room before dinner and not come down again? If she were well enough to go out, she was surely well enough to come down; but, of course, this might have an entirely different explanation.

The trouble between her and Uncle Ralph about Captain Vibart, whatever it was, might sufficiently account for a petulant and wilful little creature such as she was declining to dine with him. I never was in her confidence at all, nor was there ever any real sympathy between us, though outwardly we were always the best of friends.

One of the first inquiries that I had made as soon as I was free to do so was whether Aunt Enid had received any telephone message the night before, in answer to which she had gone out, but I could not learn that there had been any telephone call at all that evening.

The idea of going out could not have been altogether a sudden one, for she had changed her shoes. Even in the country she always wore shoes that would have been far more in place on a London pavement, but still she did make a difference between those which she wore out of doors and in the house. And they were out-of-door shoes in which she had gone to her death.

And yet she had put nothing over her head, nor had she worn any cloak or shawl. The night had been beautifully fine and still, but the season was autumnal. I had been shivering with cold during my vigil with uncle in the Summer-house.

It is curious how unwilling people are to confess that they are sound sleepers and hard to wake. Susan admitted to Sergeant Crisp that she had not heard the loud ringing of the bell—"though a light sleeper as a rule," she hastened to inform him. "And, indeed, I don't see how Mr. Grainger heard it as he did on the second, his room being up the attic stairs, and James sleeping handy to the bells who heard nothing."

"Perhaps James is a heavy sleeper," Crisp had suggested. To which Susan had replied demurely, "Men are," as if light sleep were a delicate and peculiarly feminine grace.

"You might just take me to Mr. Grainger's room," said the sergeant. "Oh, I do not mean to enter it," he added hurriedly, as he saw a look of something very like dismay pass over Susan's face. "I should just like to see where it is. And James's, too."

As a matter of fact, Grainger's room was, as Susan had said, so far from the passage in which the bells made their sound that it was singular that Grainger, "dosing in his chair," as he had suggested he might have been, should have heard the ringing, and it seemed almost equally surprising that it should have failed to rouse James, whose room was most adjacent to the passage, although that youth, on being questioned, did admit freely that his mother had expressed fears that he would not be wakened by the last trump by reason of his singular powers of sleep.

"And now that we are here," Crisp said, "I should be obliged if you would show me the disposition of the other rooms—Sir Ralph's room and her ladyship's and so on."

I had given Susan instructions that she should assist Sergeant Crisp's inquiries in every possible way. But for that instruction I do not suppose that she would have shown him all that she did without referring to uncle or to myself, but I fancy that she made very much less demur to showing him any of the chambres de maitres than she did to introducing him into the room sacred to the slumber of Mr. Grainger. After all, there is much reason in the distinction which servants made in this respect, for they are in the constant habit of going in and out of our rooms in course of their domestic service, whereas, except in the case of such tragedies as the fusing of an electric wire or some unusual occurrence of the kind, our "lawful occasions" do not take us into their rooms.

"He was a wonderful silent gentleman," Susan told me of Sergeant Crisp afterward.

It appeared, for all that, that he had asked her a good many questions. But her comment had reference to that habit of his, which I had been given considerable opportunity of noting in the Summer-house, for standing perfectly still, without the movement of a muscle, and, as it appeared, letting all that came within his view sink in through his eyes into his brain. That was the manner of his operations as they appealed to me, and they seem to have struck Susan similarly.

He stood perfectly still and looked out of the window of Uncle Ralph's room at the front of the house and at the way leading into the Summer-house. He gazed with the same silent intentness on the objects on each of the tables in the room, as if he would photograph them in his mind, but especially, as Susan said, he made a prolonged study of the rows of shoes and boots, ranging from evening "pumps" to nail-clad shooting boots, which were ranged along one side of the wall. He even took up one of each and looked at them beside each other, the "pump" and the shooting boot.

"One would hardly believe, would one," he said to Susan pleasantly, as if making amicable conversation to her, "that they could be intended to fit the same foot?" Each was of the right-foot shape.

Susan admitted that it was curious.

"Now could you," he asked, "get me one of her ladyship's shoes to compare with this one? I should like to compare it as a matter of curiosity."

Susan went in search of the shoe he asked for, greatly wondering why he should want it. I was equally at a loss when she told me about it, and it was not till long afterward, when this as well as many other puzzles had been solved, that I had any inkling of the detective's motive in asking for it. As a matter of fact, it was merely a device, the first that occurred to him, for getting Susan out of the room for a moment while he made certain measurements.

From his pocket he drew two pieces of paper—those pieces which he had cut so carefully into the exact shapes, respectively, of the finely pointed shoe and of the large and heavy boot-print which partially obliterated it, in the semicircle of soft soil in which the honeysuckle had been planted against the Summer-house wall. Comparing the more slender piece of paper by placing the "pump" upon it, he found that they tallied precisely. Comparing the broader shape in the same way with the shooting boot, the shape did not correspond at all.

By the time that Susan had returned with one of my Aunt Enid's shoes the pieces of paper had gone back into their place of hiding and the detective was still, quite aimlessly as it appeared to her, balancing the shooting boot with the "pump." A short comedy of the same kind was enacted with the tiny shoe which Susan had brought him, and then he returned it to her, saying gravely again that it was very curious.

The opinion expressed by Susan later was that which was formed by a good many who made the acquaintance of the Sergeant, that he was a queer gentleman, and she couldn't make him out at all.

Nevertheless she let me understand that on the whole he succeeded in gaining her confidence. It appeared that after the conclusion of their conversation there was very little in the relations between the various members of the household and in their duties and habits which he had not in one way or another gleaned from her.

Grainger's service in the dining-room being concluded for the time being, it seems that he appeared in my uncle's room and looked at them with an expression of strong disapproval of their presence in that apartment. He hovered about them, inventing imaginary business to perform in the way of opening drawers and shutting them again, until Crisp led the housemaid into other regions whither the butler's duties gave him no ostensible excuse for following them. Poor Aunt Enid's rooms, her bedroom and her boudoir, they found more or less under the guardianship of a person, I suppose just about as much unlike Grainger, the self-constituted guardian angel of my uncle's apartment, as one human being can be unlike another—Celeste, my aunt's French maid.

Celeste already had begun to have her own pigeon-hole in that most retentive, accurate and well-ordered storehouse of interesting facts, Sergeant Crisp's brain. Susan had already sketched for him her portrait in outlines. Now he had the opportunity of filling in some of the details at first hand.

Susan was a discreet person, measured in her opinions and her statements on men and women, but just in this particular, in her discretion, she was very dissimilar to Mademoiselle Celeste, whose virtues, whatever they may have been, did not run precisely in that direction. Though Susan was reticent, as it is the sound tradition that one servant should be in discussing another, it was not very difficult for a person of Sergeant Crisp's acumen to perceive that she did not altogether approve of Celeste. No doubt there was a little touch of sanctimoniousness about Susan, good old soul as she was, otherwise I hardly think she could have given utterance to a pious aspiration which furnished the Sergeant with a very useful clue toward the unravelling of some, at least, of the mysteries of that fateful night:

"I do hope it isn't true, what they say, as it is that Jim Heasden as had to do with it. I don't know how Celeste'll take it if it is, I'm sure."

"Celeste—oh, really?" said Sergeant Crisp, pricking up his mental ears acutely, no doubt, although making no external sign that anything interesting had reached them. "Has Celeste been keeping company with this Heasden?"

Susan received the question with a reinforcement of her admirable air of discretion.

"I'm going to say nothing," she declared. "I'm going to say nothing. And I should not say nothing if only it was keeping company or walking out. But I haven't heard as there has been any of that. Only when it does come to him and her being seen late at night in the dark, at any hour, walking in the shrubbery, then all I have to say is that it's a different thing. But I'm saying nothing. Celeste, no matter what her faults, is a fellow-servant. I'm saying nothing."

"And you are quite right, ma'am, quite right," said Crisp admiringly, having been told all that Susan was at all likely to be able to tell him on the subject. "You are quite right to be discreet in what you say about your fellow-servants."

It began to be Susan's opinion that she had never before met anybody who understood her quite so well as Sergeant Crisp. And it is not at all unlikely that she was quite right. I think that the only exception which she had to take to his conduct was a slight objection to the extreme politeness of his greeting, which she considered excessive, on first introduction to Celeste herself.

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)